

TRANSFORMATIONS: HOLOCAUST POEMS IN DAN PAGIS' *GILGUL*

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Only a small portion of the poems in Dan Pagis' collection, *Gilgûl*, are set aside distinctly as Holocaust poems. Seven short poems, grouped together under the heading "*Qārôn ḥātûm*," and the longer piece, "*ʿAqēḥôl*," refer with clarity to events of the *šôʿāh*. Yet certain basic concerns—above all an attention to entrapment and flight, captivity and freedom—which are most readily understandable in the context of the Holocaust poems, surface all the same throughout *Gilgûl*. Though these same elements take on genuinely new configurations in terms of thematic emphasis and in terms of compositional strategy (for instance, in the adoption of unusual poetic voices and in an unconventional handling of time), the poetry nonetheless returns frequently to similar ideas and problems, even to specific words, as expressions of a single, central set of preoccupations. This is not to suggest that these poems, given their imagination and variety, should be read reductively as either deliberately or clumsily obscure reference to Holocaust incidents *per se*. Rather, it means that those assumptions and outlooks which appear as puzzling, derealized aspects of many poems in the collection become comprehensible if seen in relation to the poet's treatment of the *šôʿāh*. In this sense "*Qārôn ḥātûm*" and "*ʿAqēḥôl*" may serve as a key to understanding the work as a whole. Biographically speaking, Pagis' internment in a concentration camp was a major formative experience of his youth; in *Gilgûl*, likewise, the Holocaust seems to be the source of specific circumstances out of which come attitudes that develop into a general poetic vision and an overall view of mankind.

I

One of the simplest and best known of Pagis' poems, "*Kātûḥ beʿippārôn baqqārôn heḥātûm*," lends part of its name to the entire section of Holocaust poems. It also exemplifies most clearly the attention to

entrapment so prominent throughout the book, and so discussion of this poem may begin to highlight some of the distinctive features of the rest of the poetry comprising *Gilgûl*.

Written in Pencil in the Sealed

Railway car¹

1 Here in this carload

2 I am Eve

3 with Abel my son

4 if you see my other son

5 Cain son of man

6 tell him I

כתוב בעפרון בקרון החתום

1 כאן במשלוח הזה

2 אני חווה

3 עם הכל בני

4 אם תראו את בני הגדול

5 קין בן אדם

6 תגידו לו שאני

The title of this poem tells us immediately what kind of imprisonment is at issue here, for the word *ḥatûm* (sealed), in conjunction with the word *qārôn* (railway car), carries an unmistakable association with Nazi deportations of prisoners to concentration camps. The remaining words, *Kātûh* (written) and *be^cippārôn* (in pencil), indicate that this text is a record, a trace of the past that makes a claim to historical validity. These words, evidently those of a person trapped inside the train, have been fixed and preserved for history to judge.

The importance of enclosure is conveyed not simply by means of this reference to the speech situation in the poem. It emerges as well through the deliberate artifice of the title. The form of the title puts into relief its semantic content, as a striking symmetry of pattern divides the line quite neatly in two; the number of syllables in each half is an even six, and this balance is strengthened by the close assonantal and consonantal rhyme (*ā-û, rôn + rôn, ā-û*) which depends on the chiasmic pattern of *pā^cûl +* (preposition and noun)/(preposition and noun) + *pā^cûl*. This conscious fashioning of simple vocabulary into strict design, which brings the two adjectives to frame the two nouns clearly, thereby encloses them and so dramatizes the meaning of *ḥatûm*. At the same time, the alignment of *Kātûh* and *ḥatûm*, a doubling of passive participles, draws our attention to the fact that the title describes a state, a finished process—or, more accurately put, an arrested one—and not an ongoing action.

As it highlights meanings through the arrangement of words, the title does more than simply emphasize the imprisonment of the poetic I. In addition, it acquires a strong metalinguistic impact; that is, it calls

1. Quotations here in Hebrew come from Pagis (1970). The quotations in English come from the translations by Stephen Mitchell (Pagis, 1976), except for the English version of "Draft of a Reparations Agreement," which appears in Schwartz and Rudolph (1980), p. 130. "*Ēdût aheret*" and "*Taglîl*," however, are not represented in that collection, and so I have included my own translations from these poems.

attention away from the external frame of reference and to the poem's own capacity to create meaning through the relation of one verbal element to another. This fact suggests that, while the locking in of human beings is a terrible thing, the aesthetic expression of that crime has its own beauty or appeal in its power to signify and to make us think. Consequently, the poem is not only about something that happened, but also about the nature of writing and its capacity to transform external experience.

That transformative capacity has its limitations, to be sure. As we know from the incompleteness of the last line, art cannot alter the course of what is already history. The abrupt ending stands out, particularly in contrast to the tidiness and closure of the title, since even as the poem strives to impose some order, balance, symmetry and meaning onto the world, the final cut-off of Eve's words makes a harsh comment on the limitations of poetry. Presumably the human cargo has arrived at its ghastly destination, and the self who, meeting its destiny, has no further control over the circumstances of the writing must leave its message unfinished.² All the same, even as external force takes the upper hand here, the poet still reaches beyond the stark specificity of historical event. With the exception of the word *mišlō'ah* (transport or carload), which does indeed call the Holocaust ineluctably to mind, denotation of a particular social world is notably absent from the body of the poem. (The first word, *kān* [here], while it anchors us in a present, does not clearly define a location in time and space. Instead, it acts as a deictic, that is, a word whose meaning depends most fundamentally on the self who expresses it, and which orients us primarily with regard to an individual and the moment of its own enunciation.) In the next lines, as we identify the figures of Eve, Abel and Cain, the poem shifts deliberately away from any specific historical period altogether and into another realm of understanding. We move from the here and now into the eternal present of myth, and the effect of the biblical allusion is to universalize, to project the issues of the Holocaust into a general dimension that aspires to be of meaning to all. Thus, though it ends by responding to external pressures, "*Kātûḥ be'ippārôn*" itself stands at a basic remove from historicity. It commemorates, but it does not document. It attempts in some way to

2. Barbara Herrnstein-Smith (1968, p. 146) notes that disruption from external events is a traditional technique for achieving closure in examples of poetic soliloquy. She cites as a classic example the appearance of Ophelia that ends Hamlet's to-be-or-not-to-be speech. This kind of interruption offers a convenient way of setting an end point to associative trains of thought. By contrast, the disruption in "*Kātûḥ be'ippārôn*" derives its special shock value from its suddenness and its severing of purposeful, directed thought.

transcend historical crisis and so, here, to set down in writing is in a sense to set free; the artist attempts to extend his vision beyond the irrevocable facts of atrocity itself and so to deprive brutality of the last word.

The tension between the aesthetic and the historical does not exhaust the richness of this very brief and seemingly simple poem. If the captivity referred to here is monstrous, and the aesthetic presentation of it clever and engaging—captivating in a positive sense—even so “*Kātûḥ be^ʿippārôn*” is at its most compelling as it supersedes this dichotomy of the artistic and the actual which has motivated considerable debate about the Holocaust in literature. Following the lead of T. W. Adorno, many have claimed that it is wrong in any way to beautify and thereby mitigate the horrors of Nazism through literary treatment of the topic. After Auschwitz, the argument goes, there can be only silence.³ Pagis’ poem, though, is among those that do not concede the possibility of writing about the unspeakable. True, the poem ends in silence. It is a poem about silencing, but the piece itself makes an eloquent statement on the criminality of Eve’s destruction even as it attests to the possibility for her words to survive beyond her own death. As the title told us from the start, this is writing that insists on the importance of communication, and in it is paramount a request for the reader’s response and reaction.

This aspect of “*Kātûḥ be^ʿippārôn*” emerges most forcefully through the contrast that the first three lines form with the second. Lines 1–3 establish a simple statement of identity. In opposition, lines 4–6 constitute a plea for help that is not fully articulated. (This, moreover, is a plea for help in conveying a message: that is, in itself an attempt at communication.) Eve’s addressing of her words to the plural you, the understood ^ʾ*attem* of *tir^ʾû* and *taggîdû*, clearly transforms her problem into the problem of others as well. The switch from the simplest of declarative phraseology to the conditional and the imperative (both expressed grammatically as the future tense) indicates that writing serves here as a gesture of Eve’s attempt to break through Eve’s current, existing isolation to a realm of possibility and unspecified future cooperation. In this regard, the shift from ^ʿ*im* to ^ʾ*im* (at the beginnings of lines 4 and 5), while phonetically minute, nonetheless creates a pivotal point for the poem. Roughly the same distance as that between *is* and *if*, the move from ^ʿ*ayin* to ^ʾ*aleph* in this context transfers the focus of the poem from the actual to the potential.

3. In her introductory chapter to *By Words Alone* (1978), Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi highlights some of the various positions that well-known writers and thinkers have taken on this controversial subject of artistic approaches to the Holocaust.

In this way the shift between the first three lines and the second spans a distance that is paradoxically both small and immense. The reorientation of focus from the identity of the victims to the elusive otherness of the victimizers, the survivors, the uninvolved, whoever does not share Eve's experiences but may read her message, implies a connection between them all. No one can remain entirely untouched by these events. For this reason the ending of the poem is not entirely grim. Since Eve's words are a call for help, responsibility now lies with the reader. The message has been sent, and, out of Eve's control, it passes on to any who might answer or at least acknowledge this effort at communication. Perhaps there is no appropriate emotional response to these events, but at any rate the abrupt ending does not seal a sentence of hatred, revenge or despair. True, the poem closes on a note of stifled expression with the word *ʔanî*, cutting the I off from the future in two senses. Eve's thoughts about what will be in the future remain unfinished, and, in addition, she has been separated from her children—literally, her physical continuation into the future. Chilling as it may be, though, the conclusion to "*Kātûḥ be^cippārôn*" leaves an indeterminate state of affairs and so there is room for hope. We cannot know how Cain would react to his mother's cry, but he is after all referred to as *ben ʔādām*—that is, literally the son of Adam, but, more idiomatically and fundamentally, a human being, a *mentsch*. The poet consequently does not irrevocably discount Cain's capacity for humane response, despite the murderous connotations of his name. We as readers also cannot know if poetry succeeds or fails. We do know, however, that this text opposes poetry and history as contrary impulses inextricably linked together, and so, as life intrudes on art, perhaps art can render history somehow more bearable or meaningful. If nothing else, the very use of biblical allusion here suggests that the literary tradition of the ages may still offer an effective way of expressing ourselves about social events in our own times. This move signals a sustained belief in the potential of cultural continuity.

Much of the appeal of "*Kātûḥ be^cippārôn*" lies precisely in its accessibility, its emphasis on communication, and its attempt to bridge, in some small way, the gap between the Holocaust world and the world of the contemporary reader. These qualities are notable especially in light of the insistence, typical of much writing on the Holocaust, that the sufferings of the Nazis' victims must remain indescribable, unfathomable to those who were not there. They form part of a concentrationary universe, a world entirely without precedent, other than and separate from the rest of human experience. Pagis in his poem quietly reasserts a need and an inclination to reach out to others for understanding. His is

not an easy, glib reassurance, to be sure, for we have lost all of Eve's message save for the very urge to send a message in the first place. More importantly, we have lost her and all she represents; the name Eve, designating this figure as the mother of all mankind, implies that hers is a collective death and the crime against her an affront to all humanity. All the same, if we can identify with her plight and respond to it, if her words are not lost on deaf ears, then her death becomes more pitiable and less horrifying.

This, then, is a poem about captivity that in some measure sets the captive free through words, and in so doing it also helps to contain the horror of her suffering. The moral implication is significant: as we in our reading empathize with the victim, we humanize her; that is to say, we cannot forget her nor dismiss her experience from our consciousness—though certainly there are times when we might like to—as something alien, something entirely other than and apart from ourselves.

The aesthetic implications, too, are significant and add to the distinctiveness of Pagis' poetry. While its brevity, simplicity of diction and directness of address grant "*Kātûḥ be'ippārôn*" an engaging immediacy, this is not the immediacy of starkly graphic accounts of the Holocaust, such as Kosinki's *Painted Bird* or Borowski's and Katzetnik's narratives, nor even the poeticized, metaphorical language of Paul Celan and Nellie Sachs which insists upon the ugliness of physical pain and death. Those writings which attempt accuracy in reporting life in Hitler's camps, and those which otherwise seek to convey a full measure of hellishness, risk falling short of the task and also risk driving readers away with details too terrifying or numbing to absorb. Pagis clearly turns away from this kind of approach and distances us from horrific events. At the same time, his work is neither distant nor filled with silences and evasions, as is the case with some other examples of survivor literature. Appelfeld's narratives, for instance, consistently veer away from historicity, from definite time and place, revolving always about a conspicuously unnamed, unnameable horror. While his writing bears a beauty and fascination of its own, still the insubstantiality of the characters, the place settings and the temporal dimensions leave it finally an enigmatically laconic, highly aestheticized fiction, which is yet more grim than the work of Pagis.

As a whole, in fact, *Gilgûl* exhibits a remarkable capacity, not only for compassion and accessibility, but even for a wonder and playfulness that help foster a humanizing effect, a turn away from horror. Pagis achieves these qualities by moving in two seemingly opposing directions. First, as we have already seen, we find in his poetry something quite

other than the hermeticism or incommunicability that characterizes the response of much modern poetry to historical crisis. Pagis shares with Amihai, Zakh and others the colloquial, low-key diction that becomes a hallmark of Hebrew poetry after the 50's and 60's.⁴ Pagis' work, moreover, often adopts a pointedly conversational aspect, an emphasis on unpretentious, ordinary spoken language, which is marked by a frequent use of direct address. Secondly, this work incongruously mixes these everyday, shared exchanges with, for example, myth—as in the allusion to Genesis in “Written in Pencil”—or with legend, whimsy, the supernatural and the fantastic.⁵ The inconsistency of these two approaches is only apparent, for both represent the poet's positing of a spiritual power bigger than the facts of catastrophe. Able to move beyond the frightful trauma it has sustained, this spirit can both conceive of better worlds and also return to the communion of simple, everyday dialogue. These two approaches do indeed, however, grant Pagis' work a contradictory quality, for his poetry paradoxically retains its humanizing capacity most clearly as it leaves behind the facts of harshly familiar, often all-too-human affairs. In addition, Pagis plays on the discrepancy between the prodigious and the ordinary with varying kinds and degrees of irony.

As we look individually at the other poems in the “*Qārôn hātûm*” section of *Gilgûl*, this, then, will be the principal pattern to emerge repeatedly in various permutations and guises; these poems, which focus again and again on entrapment and release, captivity and escape, combine an engaging conversationalism with a noteworthy flight into fantasy or otherwise extraordinary modes of being and perceiving. Both artistic strategies, in their own way, affirm the power of poetry to speak meaningfully to the inexpressibly gruesome subject of the Holocaust.

II

The titles of the “*Qārôn hātûm*” poems serve an important function in Pagis' contradictory approach to the *šô'āh*. Most of these titles refer to language—language, moreover, in its capacity as social exchange. In addition to “written in pencil,” for example, we find “*‘Ēdût* (“Testimony”), “*‘Ēdût ‘aheret*” (“Another testimony”), “*Hôrā’ôt lignedbat*

4. For an outline of prominent trends in Hebrew poetry of this period, see Shimon Sandbank (1977), T. Carmi (1981), and Schwartz and Rudolf (1980).

5. In two excellent articles (1976 and 1976 with Meir Sternberg) Tamar Yacobi discusses at length the compositional features and wordplay that add to Pagis' exploration of unconventional perspectives. Particularly useful in this respect is the discussion in the second essay on allusion, which specifies some of Pagis' debt to myth and legend.

haggebûl” (“Instructions for Crossing the Border”) and “*Ṭeyûṭat heskēm lešillûmîm*” (“Draft of a Reparations Agreement”). The remaining two titles, “*‘Ērôppa me’auḥār*” (“Europe, Late”) and “*Ḥammisdār*” (“The Roll Call”) do not refer so clearly to language, but they, too, like the others, serve as labels to define speech situations which might otherwise remain peculiar, obscure or puzzling. This means that each title ensures the poet’s freedom not to be too referential in the body of the text itself, and so it therefore allows the poem a certain amount of free imaginative rein. At the same time, though, the titles remind us as readers that these poems cannot be separated from reference to the Holocaust. Our readings may not wander too far from historical awareness. Above all, the headings guarantee that we don’t lose sight of the importance of *talking* about the *šō’āh*. Pagis does not withdraw into private perception nor into exploration of individual grief or nightmare; instead, the poems here present a collective experience which elicits discussion, exchange or a vocal demand for recognition.

Illustrating the poet’s dual movement away from abhorrent actuality and toward dialogue, “Draft of a Reparations Agreement” expresses the impossibility of making things right again after the fact. In an effort to break free from the bonds of the incontrovertible, to undo the enslavement of the victims, this poem supposes a fanciful reversing of the laws of chronology and causality.

DRAFT OF A REPARATIONS AGREEMENT טיוטת ההסכם לשלומים

- 1 All right, gentlemen who cry/ אֲדוֹנִים הַזּוֹעֲקִים חֶמֶס כְּתָמִיד, טוב טוב, טוב
blue murder as always,
- 2 nagging miracle-makers, בְּעֵלֵי נִסִּים טוֹרְדָנִים, 2
- 3 quiet! שָׁקֵט! 3
- 4 Everything will be returned to its place, הַכֹּל יֵחֹזַר לְמִקְוָמוֹ, 4
- 5 paragraph after paragraph. סְעִיף אַחֵר סְעִיף, 5
- 6 The scream back into the throat. הַצֶּעָקָה אֶל תּוֹךְ הַגְּרוֹן, 6
- 7 The gold teeth back to the gums. שְׁנֵי הַזָּהָב אֶל הַלֶּסֶת, 7
- 8 The terror. הַפַּחַד, 8
- 9 The smoke back to the tin/ הַעֲשָׁן אֶל אֲרָבוֹת הַפַּח וְהַלְאָה וּפְנִימָה
chimney and further on and inside 9
- 10 back to the hollow of the bones, אֶל חֲלָל עֲצָמוֹת, 10
- 11 and already you will be covered/ וּכְבֹר תִּקְרְמוּ עוֹר וְגִידִים וְתַחֲיוּ, 11
with skin and sinews and you will live,
- 12 look, you will have your lives back, הִנֵּה עֵדִין תַּחֲיוּ לָכֶם, 12
- 13 sit in the living room, read the/ יוֹשְׁבִים בְּסֻלּוֹן, קוֹרְאִים עִתּוֹן עָרֵב, 13
evening paper.
- 14 Here you are. Nothing is too late. הִנֵּה הֵנֶכֶם! הַכֹּל בְּעוֹד מוֹעֵד, 14

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|----|
| 15 As to the yellow star: immediately | וְאֶשֶׁר לְכוּכַב הַצָּהָב: מִיָּד יִחַלֵּשׁ | 15 |
| 16 it will be torn from your chest | מֵעַל הַחֹזֶה | 16 |
| 17 and will emigrate | וְיִהְיֶה גֵר | 17 |
| 18 to the sky. | לְשָׁמַיִם. | 18 |

For all their whimsicality, the promises of "*Ṭeyûṭat heskem*" are nonetheless presented in ordinary spoken language. In keeping with the mixture of the sublime or the extraordinary with the down-to-earth in Pagis' poetry, the speaker begins with the words "*ṭoh, ṭoh . . . šeket!*" as if addressing a disgruntled group of unwieldy individuals set on causing a nuisance. Yet these grumblers do not harbor a petty grievance; they present a justifiable demand for a miracle, for it would indeed take a miracle to erase their suffering and restore their lives. As a result, the humorous (though slightly macabre) incongruity between the gravity of the situation and the speaker's tone of impatient indulgence does not indicate a blasphemous disregard for what the people have undergone; it points instead to the foibles of those who think there can be any recompense commensurate with the damage done. Rather than approaching the problem directly, in an earnest fashion, the poem adopts a lightness that puts into relief the laughable absurdity of such a notion as reparations. Any vitriolic rhetoric, any vituperative statement of indignation or impassioned cry of grief, would of necessity seem a protest unequal to the crime committed. Pagis' indirect, ironic approach, though, allows us to talk about intolerably serious things. All in all, the poem implies, we are human beings and must cope with our loss in human terms, even when that loss is beyond measure.

It is not only the conversational tone of the speaker, then, that brings the issues back to the sphere of the commonplace and the familiar in "*Ṭeyûṭat heskēm*." The essentially comic mode of the poem also fosters a feeling of intimacy with the reader. One of the most culture-specific of things, humor can be effective only among those with shared assumptions and common understandings. While "*Ṭeyûṭat heskēm*" does not display the direct address aimed at the reader which is so outstanding a feature of "*Kāiûb be'ippārôn*," this poem does similarly assume a closeness to the audience. It asks us not to distance ourselves from the victims it concerns, and the text also offers the limited consolation of knowing that at least it is possible to talk about the issues at stake in some kind of recognizable language. The fun poked at the speaker here reassures us, as readers, that we share an understandable language of irony.

"Europe, Late," like the previous poem, is also structured prominently around dialogue. As in "Written in Pencil," the poet approaches the

problem of how to talk about the Holocaust by allowing the era to speak for itself. By whimsically personifying elements of the atmosphere, the seabreeze and the park as voices, the poem makes the thoughts of the period accessible to the reader. It further achieves a closeness between now and then, telescoping the world of text and the world of the reader, by adopting once more a composition with an interrupted ending.

EUROPE LATE

אירופה, מאוחר

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 1 | Violins float in the sky, | 1 | בשמים פורחים כנורות |
| 2 | and a straw hat. I beg/
your pardon, | 2 | ומגבעת של קש. סלחי לי, מה השנה? |
| 3 | what year is it? | 3 | שלשים וחמש וחצי, בערך, עור מקדם מקדם, |
| 4 | Thirty-nine and a half, still awfully early, | 4 | אפשר לסגר את הרדיו, |
| 5 | You can turn off the/
radio. | 5 | נא להכיר: זאת רוח הים, הרוח החיה של הטילת, |
| 6 | I would like to introduce you to: | 6 | שוכבה להפליא. |
| 7 | the sea breeze, the life of the party, | 7 | מסחררת שמלות פצמון, טופחת |
| 8 | terribly mischievous, | 8 | על פני עתונים מדאגים: טנגו! טנגו! |
| 9 | whirling in a bell-skirt, slapping down | 9 | וגן העיר מתנגן לו, |
| 10 | the worried newspapers: tango! tango! | 10 | אני נושק ירך, מאדאם, |
| 11 | And the park hums to itself: | 11 | ירך העדינה כמו |
| 12 | I kiss your dainty hand, madame, | 12 | כסית העור הלבנה, |
| 13 | your hand as soft and elegant | 13 | הכל יבוא על מקומו |
| 14 | as a white suede glove. You'll see, madame, | 14 | בחלום, |
| 15 | that everything will be all right, | 15 | אל תדאגי כל כך, מאדאם, |
| 16 | just heavenly—you wait and see. | 16 | כאן לעולם זה לא יקרה, |
| 17 | No it could never happen here, | 17 | את עוד תראי, |
| 18 | don't worry so—you'll see—it could | 18 | כאן לעולם |

Due to the severing of the last line in midsentence we feel a shock of recognition that violent actuality has intruded into poetic design. The poem ends because the era itself ends. Violating the convention that a poetic world has an integrity of its own, apart from external event, the text leaves the reader with an uncomfortable reminder of the fragility of art. More importantly, we see that the traumas of the second world war—which we know from our perspective in time to have already begun in 1939—have here penetrated into the idyllic lives of the figures in the poem. We share with them, consequently, a new understanding which underscores their earlier misperception of danger. The same kind of abrupt termination that assures Anne Frank's diary its sentimental reception and that grants pathos to the urgency of Eve's unfinished entreaty in "*Kātūh be^cippārôn,*" in "*Ērôppā, me^uhār*" serves to put into ironic relief the foolish attitudes of trust among those who did not

see disaster coming. Caught unawares, those who relied on wishful thinking were nonetheless ensnared in the Nazi's final solution. Thus, we note, in the "early" and naive Europe of the poem, the phrase "*kān le'ôlām*" (line 16) initiates a statement of positive sentiment, expressed grammatically in negative form: here it will never happen. But, as history captures these last words and freezes them into an immutable stance, the same phrase acquires different meaning. Now we have, grammatically speaking, a positively stated remark, but we also have a negative implication; here and for always the atmosphere of good intentions and well-wishing will signify a dangerously inadequate grasp of reality. Poetry cannot erase the course of history, but it can perhaps help issue a warning of permanent value.

"Instructions for Crossing the Border" is another selection from "*Qārôn ḥatûm*" which uses direct address and converges poetic time—the time in which the text is read—with the time of the poetic world. The primary effect, again, is to lessen the distance between the reader and the individual referred to in the poem. Here, again, however, the variations mark the treatment of elements common also to "*Ērōppā me'auḥār*," and "*Kātûḥ be'ippārôn*."

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CROSSING THE BORDER

הוראות לגנבת הגבול

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 Imaginary man, go. Here is your/
passport. | 1 אדם בדיוי, סע. הנה הדרכון. |
| 2 You are not allowed to remember. | 2 אסור לך לזכר. |
| 3 You have to match the description. | 3 אתה חייב להתאים לפרטים: |
| 4 Your eyes are already blue. | 4 עיניך כבר כחולות. |
| 5 Don't escape with the sparks | 5 אל תברח עם הגצים מתוך |
| 6 inside the smokestack: | 6 ארבת הקטר: |
| 7 you are a man, you sit in the train. | 7 אתה אדם יושב בקרון. שב נינוח. |
| 8 Sit comfortably. | 8 הרי המעיל הגיון. הגוף מתקן. |
| 9 You've got a decent coat now, | 9 השם החדש מוכן בגרונך. |
| 10 a repaired body, a new name | 10 סע. סע. אסור לך לשכח. |
| 11 ready in your throat. | |
| 12 Go. You are not allowed to forget. | |

The poet in "*Hôrā'aôt lignēbat haggebûl*" uses the immediacy of imperatives (*sa'*, *al tibraḥ*, *šēḥ*, *ninô'ah*) to draw us into the present of the poem's speaker. The reader is thus not deprived, as was the case before, of the illusion of an inviolable textual reality. We are not forced abruptly back into an external reality through an untimely ending. Instead, the use of the second person address exerts pressure on us to read the poem as if adopting a role: either, as we voice the words, the active role of

giving the instructions, or, as we perceive what is being said, the passive role of receiving the commands. In each case we identify with the time frame of the discourse in the poem itself.

This time frame is a present of the most urgent sort, which brings our attention to the poet's overriding concern, here as elsewhere, with imprisonment and flight. The man addressed in this poem must hurry to safety, and his escape is a matter of life and death. The many definite nouns (*haddarkôn*, *happerāʾīm*, *haggišīm*, *haqqaṭṭār*, *hammeʿīl*, *haššēm*, *gerônkā*, *ʿēnekā*) reinforce this impression. Their specificity implies that everything depends on details in a very defined here and now. Although he is an imaginary man, still, theories, imagination and wishful thinking will not suffice to save him. Because of the urgency of the situation, escape and entrapment, as in "Written in Pencil," once more appear as phenomena not easily separated. While Eve's escape, however, is a very partial one, accomplished only through writing and too late, of course, to save her personally, this poem confounds the very notion of survival with entrapment. In order to make his getaway, the imaginary man is under enormous pressure to behave in a certain way, within very narrow, even impossible and contradictory strictures. First he must adjust to the trappings of a new identity (a new name, clothes, and, we are told with the playful improbability of Pagis' poetics, even eye color); simultaneously he is forbidden to remember and to forget. Consequently he must do a balancing act which is logically undoable and which traps him in an intolerable tension.

The emphasis that his flight to safety is not simply an escape, but also a trap, is clear especially from line 5, "*ʿal tibrah ʿimaggišīm*." It appears that to escape, really to escape, would be to turn to smoke like those who perished in gas chambers. Conversely, to remain a human being is to remain in a violent and ugly world. To survive is to accept the burden of memory, the burden of loss, and the burden of belonging to such a brutal world.

The poem "*ʿĒdūt*" makes explicit this last point, that the *šōʿāh* took place in a brutal and very human realm, as an undeniably concrete reality. And yet, at the same time, "Testimony" postulates a breaking away from the confining shackles of such a world. While the refugee of the previous poem had to become an imaginary man, had to evade his actual, social identity to secure physical safety, the prisoners in this next case leave the agonies of the material world behind for a spiritual release. These victims, the poem asserts, were something quite other than the creatures who inflicted their suffering on them, something either more or less than human but certainly closer to the divine.

- 4 Listen to my heart, hardened/ ראה את עיני. הקשב ללבי הקשה בדיון.
 in judgment see my suffering.
 5 Your accomplices, Michael/ מִשְׁחַפְּיֵי־הַפְּעֵלָה שְׁלֹךְ, מִיכָאֵל, גַּבְרִיאֵל,
 and Gabriel,
 6 stand and confess עומדים ומודים
 7 that you said: "Let us make man," שְׁאָמַרְתָּ: נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם.
 8 and they replied, "Amen." וְהֵם אָמְרוּ אָמֵן.

The remaining poem of "*Qarôn hātûm*" not yet discussed here is the one that deals most directly with the sphere of human cruelty. In "*Hammisdār*" the speech act actually takes place in a concentration camp, not before the most horrific of events nor after. Once again the use of the present tense makes the immediacy of specific acts felt for the reader, and yet once again there is a simultaneous distancing from that reality. Distancing occurs since, curiously, this is the poem in which the speaker is least present, least at one with events.

THE ROLL CALL

המסדר

- 1 He stands, stamps a little in his boots, רוקע מעט במגפיו. הוא עומד,
 2 rubs his hands. He's cold in/ מִשְׁפֹּשֵׁף אֶת יָדָיו: קָר לוֹ בְּרוּחַ הַבֹּקֶר, 2
 the morning breeze:
 3 a diligent angel, who has worked/ מְלָאךְ חָרוּץ שֶׁעָמַל וְעָלָה בְּדִרְגָּה. 3
 hard for his promotions.
 4 Suddenly he thinks he's made a/ פְּתָאֵם נִדְמָה לוֹ שֶׁנָּהָ: כְּלוּ עֵינַיִם 4
 mistake: all eyes,
 5 he counts again in the open notebook הוא חוזר ומונה בפנקס הפתוח 5
 6 all the bodies waiting for him in the/ אֶת הַגּוּפִים הַמַּחְמִיכִים לוֹ בְּרִבְעָ, 6
 square,
 7 camp within camp: only I מְחִנָּה בִּלְב מְחִנָּה: רַק אֲנִי 7
 8 am not there, am not there, am a mistake, אֵינִי, אֵינִי, טעות, 8
 9 turn off my eyes, quickly erase my/ מִבְּכָה מֵהָר אֶת עֵינַי, מוֹחֵק אֶת צְלִי. 9
 shadow.
 10 I shall not want. The sum will be in/ לֹא אֶחְסַר, אָנָּה. הַחֲשֹׁבוֹן יֵעָלָה 10
 order.
 11 without me: here for eternity. בְּלִעְדִּי: כָּאן לְעוֹלָם. 11

Here, to be means not to be, for attendance during the roll call assures the speaker of dying. Consequently, to survive means paradoxically to negate oneself: as the speaker says, "[*anī*] *môhēq ʿet šilli*" ([I] erase my shadow)—line 9. It appears that somehow he has been overlooked or has slipped away, yet the contradiction follows him, condensed into the ambivalence of the expression "*lô ʿeḥsār*" (line 10). Echoing Psalm 23, the phrase has been translated into English as "I shall not want"—that is, God and God's protection will not be absent or lacking for me. The

translation might, however, have indicated "I shall not be absent"; I will not be the one lost or reduced to smoke. Not to be there, therefore, also means its opposite: not to be absent. The final line, recalling "Europe, Late," ends with a similarly ambivalent phrase: "*kān le^côlām*." Perhaps these words refer to the count of the dead which will continue to rise without this individual; yet, again, the phrase may indeed refer to him. Having been passed over, he will remain here forever. Having escaped physically, he will have internalized this experience and may never shake it loose. (It should be noted that in "*Ērôppā, me³uhār*" the phrase *kān le^côlām* was left hanging, ending the poem for dramatic value in mid-sentence. In "The Roll Call," by contrast, we find a simple indicative; the victim's sentence here is definitive, sealed for all time.) Like "Instructions for Crossing the Border," though in more intensified form, this poem, too, confounds escape with entrapment.

In "*Hammisdār*," by comparison with the other Holocaust poems we have considered, the conversational element of Pagis' work is considerably reduced. Line 10, with the word "*ānnā*," does clearly turn the phrase "*Lô ʔehsār*" into a supplication; we do not know, though, if this is a prayer directed toward God, a futile entreaty directed toward the officer in charge of the roll call, or simply the prisoner's thoughts kept to himself. The resulting sense of incomplete dialogue which emerges from this uncertainty makes us keenly aware of the solitude and isolation of the speaker. Here he is in the very midst of trauma, and so the possibility for communication is at a minimum. Another feature of this poem also represents a significant alteration of basic patterns we have seen in the other Holocaust selections. Before, the poet used a highlight on imagination to emphasize the possibility of escape from the arena of horrific fact; he turned, for instance, to the confabulation of a disguised identity in "*Hôrāʔaôt*," to the use of ahistorical, mythic motif and aesthetic design in "*Katuh be^cippārôn*," and to the assignation of special spiritual qualities to the victims in "*Ēdūt*." In "*Hammisdār*," however, the poet turns to figurative, imaginative description in the phrase "diligent angel" to draw attention to the officer. This means that not the victim, but the oppressor gains special prominence here. The metaphor accomplishes two things. It magnifies our awareness of the power this individual has over others' lives, and so it grants him a super-human status; at the same time, though, it also cheapens or lowers the meaning of "angel" back to earthly proportions. This is an angel, after all, who has had to work hard for his promotions. The leveling of worldly and other-worldly realms suggest a wavering of faith, a doubt that some other dimension of being might offer escape from immediate, material suffering. There is no clear distinction here between the brutal human

world and a benevolent spiritual one. The ambivalence which this picture presents corresponds, then, to the central sense of dilemma created by "*Hammisdār*," the notion of survival as a constant tension and not as a true release.

The variations that this poem represents over the other selections of "*Qārôn hātûm*," taken in consideration with readings of those previous texts, help put into relief the unusual qualities of Pagis' poetic approach to the *šô'āh*. Alan Mintz (1984, p. 30), writing on the nature of figurative language throughout the ages in Jewish literary response to catastrophe, explains two traditional kinds of approach to establishing rapport with those who have suffered. He notes that the direction a metaphor takes in such writing depends on who is being addressed:

When the recipient is the victim, the purpose of the metaphor is to reduce the power of the catastrophe downscale with the known and familiar; the metaphor moves from major to minor. When the recipient of the discourse is not the victim—this includes later generations, bystanders, and, as in the case of Lamentations, God Himself—the purpose becomes to suggest the full horror of the event to those who have no primary experience of it. Under these circumstances the direction of the metaphor is reversed to make it work from minor to major, from the known to the unimaginable, from the empirical to the negative transcendent.

Pagis, as we have seen, rarely follows the impulse to indicate horror. Only in "The Roll Call" does he emphasize the power of the victimizer, and this power is mitigated, of course, by the eventual escape of the prisoner ("*rak ʾani/ʾēnennī, ʾēnennī, ʾani taʿūt*"—"Only I/am not there, am not there, am a mistake"). Much more often Pagis at most indicates the fullness of horror, without horrifying, by simply suggesting how far one must run from the gruesome facts in order to assimilate their impact. His poetic voices attempt to implement alternative realities, for instance, by reversing laws of time and causality, by changing eye color, by living in a fantasy world of idyllic carnival, or by denying that they are members of the human race at all. The striving for something beyond the here and now, the upscaling of vision out of this world, comforts more than it upsets, as it points to the possibility of redemption. The other impulse that Mintz describes, which is a move toward the familiar and the known, also takes a different twist in Pagis' work. The rhetorical devices that emphasize communication in his poetry do make for a degree of consolation, but they are not directed exclusively, or even primarily, to the victims. They speak to others as well, contracting the distinctions between victims and non-victims and insisting on the possibility of understanding between the two. The agonies of the *šô'āh* cannot—should not—be isolated from the rest of human affairs.

Indeed, as we begin to look at poems outside the "*Qārôn ḥātûm*" group, we will see that in *Gilgûl* there is considerable carry-over from Holocaust to non-Holocaust experience and considerable overlap of vision between Holocaust poems and material of a seemingly different nature altogether.

III

Connections between the Holocaust poems and the non-Holocaust poems in *Gilgûl* take several forms. The most easily recognizable thematic continuity in the collection is probably the treatment of man's inhumanity, which figures prominently in a number of poems outside the "*Qārôn ḥātûm*" section.⁶ "*Bamma'ahādāh*" ("In the Laboratory"), for instance, presents a scientific experiment that observes the effect of poisonous vapors on the group behavior of scorpions, a highly orderly and cohesive natural society. Reference to the scorpions as a *minyān* and reference to a miniature kind of gas chamber brings this poem to the brink of explicit treatment of the *šô'āh* and to denunciation of Nazi cruelties carried out in the name of science. More removed from reference to the Holocaust, "*Hešbôn šānû'a*" ("Modest Sum") portrays man's forbears in the evolutionary scheme of things as creatures reluctant to develop into human beings, hesitant to take on the role of the "well-adjusted hunter." Echoes of these reservations about civilization persist throughout Pagis' work. In the later collection "*Mô'ah*" (Brain), for example, the piece "*Dû-regel*" ("Bi-ped") in particular characterizes man as an unusual and puzzling animal of prey.

A second element that carries over decisively into the non-Holocaust poems of *Gilgûl* is the internalization of dilemma, the impossibility of finding true release from an oppressive anguish. This link between *šô'āh* poems and other texts is a likely enough one, after all, for the experience of rescue as a guilty burden is one which the survivor carries with him out of imprisonment and into another life. Though physical punishment is no longer at issue in such poems, entrapment continues to be a matter of prime concern. For example, the final and perhaps most bitter poem of the collection, "*Behinat siyyûm*" ("Final Examination"), presents memory as a trap, and a cruel one at that. One voice asserts that wounds from the past continue even now to cause him pain and are as acutely present as they were before. A second voice replies by demanding to know more specific details about that past, and by pressing the other to recall horrible events with more immediacy: "*Lô, lô kākā lô šām*

6. For some interesting insights into this view of mankind in Pagis' work, see Yacobi (1976), especially p. 147.

hazzikārôn./ ʔāmartâ rak māšāl (“—No, that is not right. Memory is not there./ What you said is only a parable”). Addressing the first speaker as “my servant” or “my slave,” this examiner-interrogator coerces him into acknowledging the inescapability of torments once experienced and always remembered.

In a number of other poems there arises a comparable preoccupation with being trapped inside oneself or with not being able to escape from past experience. In “*Keḅār hāyîṭî beṭerem ʔanî*” (“Already”), for instance, the poetic voice refers to himself as “*sāgûr bēn dāmî ledāmî*”—“closed between my blood and my blood.” Similarly, in “*Šē me ʔišṭagnîṭūṭkâ*” (“Come”), we read “*soḅ kâḅûy betôḵ galgal damḱâ*”—(“come/ . . . and revolve, extinguished, inside the wheel of your blood”). A related, intense desire for escape from the boundaries of the self expresses itself in “*Mûḱān liprēdāh*” (“Ready for Parting”): *ʔulai/ šellô beʔittî ʔel ʕašmî ʔumimennî vehalʔāh/ . . . ʔēšē ʔel jûngāl šel gešem* (“Perhaps/ not in my own time into myself and from myself and onward/ . . . I will go out into the jungle of rain”). These rather involuted statements of self-entanglement tend toward the enigmatic; they do not explain themselves in the context of each individual poem. They make eminent sense, however, when seen in relation to the treatment of survival as entrapment throughout Pagis’ Holocaust poems.

The self-containment presented in Pagis’ poetry may bring with it an acute brand of loneliness, because it signifies a separation from God. Thus, in “*Megulgāl ʔel tôḱî*” (“The Seashell”) we read “*rēk mit-tāmîd vekālû bekōl pittûlay/ ʔēḱ ʔeḱeyeh beṣawweḱâ šelô ḥittaltâ ʕalay*” (“Emptyer than ever, imprisoned in my convolutions/ how will I live by the commands that you didn’t give me”). By the same token, involution of the self within itself may mean a different kind of loneliness, a separating out of two different identities within one personality. In the poem with the paradoxical title “*Keḅār hāyîṭî beṭerem ʔanî*,” for example, the poet posits one “I” and two selves that do not enjoy a continuity or grant the individual a cohesive sense of personhood. Such discontinuity does hold some positive promise for the future, however. In “*Taglîṭ*” (“The Discovery”), for instance, a similarly improbable division of the self into separate entities clearly indicates not only a loss of old identity, but also a freedom to enter into a new self. The individual undergoing a remarkable transition here gains an extraordinary sense of balance, like a tightrope walker who no longer has need of a rope and feels that even without it he cannot possibly fall. This transformation to a new state of being culminates in a grammatically illogical but psychologically liberating conversion of nominative into objective: “*ʔet mî hāyîṭâ ʕad ʕaḱšāḅ?*

veʿek yādaʿtā/ liprôq ʿet ʿašmekā hazzar?” (“Who were you till now? And how did you know/ how to set your alien self free?”).⁷

The tension in this collection of poems between a feeling of no escape and the welcoming relief of transformation expresses itself succinctly in different uses of the root *g.l.g.l.* The last line of “Come” (“*sōh, kāhûi betôk galgal damkā*”—“revolve, extinguished inside the wheel of your blood”) and the first line of “Seashell” (“*megulgāl ʿel tôkî*”—“turned into myself”) rely on the association of *g.l.g.l.* with the meaning “wheel” or “cycle,” that is, a system of enclosure or self-containment. The title, *Gilgûl*, by contrast, draws on the same root, too, but while it can signify revolving or turning about, it may also indicate resurrection, metamorphosis, transmigration or transfiguration—in short, a return which brings about a change. Indeed, the Holocaust poems discussed here presented escape in just such terms of transformation: as a new identity in “*Hôrāʾaôt*,” as a reversing of chronological sequence, a breaking free of the strictures of forward-moving time in “*Teyûlat heskēm*,” as the conversion of victims into a more divine essence when they are reduced to smoke in “*Ēdût*,” and of course in “*Kātûh beʿippārôn*” and “*Ērôppa, Meʿuḥar*,” as the transformation of unfinished thoughts into a lasting message that endures beyond the deaths of those who originated them. Many of the other poems of *Gilgûl*, while not referring to the Holocaust nor even to entrapment explicitly, also similarly seek out metamorphoses as part of a continuing fascination with escape.

Such a conception stands out thematically, for example in “*nāhāš*.” (“Snake”). The snake who sheds its skin continually and looks ever forward to the future erases traces of the past and releases himself from his history. Concluding that this stance grants him the power to determine his own (and others’) identities, he remarks, “*beḳōl hammidbār hazzeh rak ʿanî menahēš/ mî hāyāh mî*” (In all this desert only I can guess/who was who.”). The play on the root *n.h.s.* in *nāhāš* and *menahēš* suggests that this capriciousness and elusiveness are associated with his very essence. Found in a section called “*Hasvāʾôt*” (“Camouflages”) this poem indicates a concern with change and disguise highly reminiscent of “Instructions for Crossing the Border.”

Others of Pagis’ poems assume a startling transformation in the very definition of their speech act. Poems such as “*Sôp haššeʿelôn*” (“End of

7. Edna Sharoni (1976) calls attention to the *döppelgänger*, the double of the self, that haunts the poetic persona in “Brain,” Pagis’ collection of poems which appeared in 1976. The treatment of the *döppelgänger* in this later work recalls the division of the self notable in parts of *Gilgûl*.

the Questionnaire”) and “*‘Esrîm šānāh baggai*” (“Twenty Years in the Valley”) suppose a supernatural, continuing existence after death. The first poem presents a bureaucratic form to be filled out by those already deceased; the second adopts the voice of a person 20 years dead and buried. In “*‘Ādām hamme‘arôt*” (“Caveman”), the speaker is similarly a disembodied voice, alert and lively after eons of time of physical death. “Pages in an Album” (“*Dipdûp be‘albûm*”), in its turn, has been interpreted convincingly as either a metaphorical view of life in retrospect or as a near death experience which brings special psychic insights (Sadka, 1979). At whatever level of concreteness we choose to take this poem, we can easily understand it, like the other poems, as more than simple fantasizing or derealizing verbal play; all represent the postulation of a world of the spirit that allows the poet to move beyond the painful confines of an earthly present and past.⁸

Yet other poems, which bear the mark of science fiction, adopt unusual perspectives by situating the poetic “I” in a far distant future. “*Hallāfî*” (“Spaceship”) and “*Ši‘ûr betaspîr*” (“A Lesson in Observation”) in this way permit their speakers to escape the destruction of the earth and to speculate on its history as a remote or strictly academic question.

Finally, evolution, too, becomes an important topic in *Gilgûl*, and for similar reasons, as part of a concern with metamorphosis. As Yacobi (1976) has documented so well, a striking feature of many of these poems is Pagis’ fondness for composition that relies on the coincidence of poetic time (duration of speech act itself) with the time of the events reported. The result is a striking speeding up and dramatizing of an evolving process. In the few minutes it takes to read or recite a poem, the life of an individual described therein has passed, as in “*Happortret*” (“The Portrait”) and “*Dipdûp be‘albûm*”; the last of a species has been hunted as we listen to his explanation of his impending doom as in “*‘Aḥarônîm*” (“The Last Ones”); or an ape has evolved into man as in “*Liqrat*” (“The Readiness”). This is the same device we saw also in “Written in Pencil,” and in “Europe, Late,” in which a historical period advances from 1939 to a later, more ominous date. In subsequent cases, however, the strangeness of effect is exaggerated because of the incon-

8. Alan Mintz has commented on “Autobiography,” from *Brain*, as a similar extension of these concerns. The speaker of this poem is the world’s first victim, Abel. Though dead many thousands of years, he remains existent and capable of speech, even as the physical survivors of *Qārôn ḥātûm* function only as phantoms or disembodied wraiths. Neither kind of figure can genuinely live nor truly die (see Mintz, 1984, pp. 263–69).

gruity between the time span referred to and the short time span necessary for reading.

How are we to understand these transformations enacted during the reading of the poems? Yacobi argues that the technique has two primary ramifications. It highlights the inability of art to forestall the passage of time, and it represents an original kind of composition which sharpens the aesthetic interest of the poetry by giving a new twist to conventional, even trite themes of temporality: mutability, memory and oblivion. Certainly the device emphasizes the fleeting, transitory nature of life and incorporates a new, twentieth century flavor into traditional themes long the staple of western poetry. All the same, these issues might be understood more fully in the context of Pagis' concern with entrapment and flight. Time here may be either trap or escape. In some instances we find the no-exit of death ("The Portrait") reminiscent of the traditional *ubi sunt* idea; evolution, too, has an unfortunate end as it brings the disappointments of civilization in "Modest Sum." However, "Pages in an Album" may suggest death as an entry into another way of being, just as "A Lesson in Observation" and "Spaceship" suggest that life may evolve into something other than and better than earthly existence.

Altogether the exaggerated speeding up of time in many of Pagis' poems may above all convey a sense of wonder or wry amazement at the extraordinary changes life confers. The accelerated metamorphoses of "The Readiness" are remarkable, but perhaps no more astonishing than those of a single lifetime, for instance, in "The Portrait." Furthermore, they are not entirely different in kind from the enormous changes asked of the imaginary man in "Instructions for Crossing the Border." He, too, must move from one identity to another, from one realm of being to another, accepting a series of difficult adjustments in an ever-moving flow of time. Pagis' poems leave us finally with neither gloom and doom nor with playful celebration, but with a mixture of both and a sense of enigma. Yeshurun Keshet (1975), remarking on the cosmic scope of some of Pagis' poems, quite rightly notes that there is something sweet in observing the riddles of life and something bitter in formulating answers to those riddles; Pagis hence often leaves his poetry without answers, and instead poses puzzles and questions alone. Unlike Sachs and Celan, Pagis does not use reflections on the Holocaust either to reaffirm faith or to reject it and so to explore the ramifications of a loss of faith. He is content, rather, with ironies that attest to the contradictory experience of survival and the puzzling inhumanity of humankind. By the same token, his non-Holocaust poems are characterized not by pronouncements but by ambivalence, as they observe changes that

will not allow us ever to fully distinguish between time as freedom and time as captivity.

IV

An interest in the supernatural, the use of unusual voices and time schemes, the reporting of perspectives beyond life in this world and human existence as we know it—elements which form an implicit underpinning of Pagis' poetics—appear, too, in “*ʿAqēḥôt*” (“Footprints” or traces). Here, though, they appear in elaborated fashion, explained from within a Holocaust context, and they do not simply set up a speech situation whose circumstances must be surmised at or guessed; instead they are part of a narrative sequence which traces the journey of a poetic “I” out of the death camps, up to the heavens and the spirit world, and then back down to earth. This poem, then, comes as a reconfirmation of our initial speculation that many puzzling devices of Pagis' poetry are most easily naturalized and understood in more familiar terms as an outgrowth of a central concern with flight, a concern springing concretely from Holocaust experience. A much longer poem than any discussed so far (29 verses, divided into three sections), “*ʿAqēḥôt*” constitutes a kind of compendium of outstanding themes touched on in the pieces of “*Qārôn ḥātûm*” which expand out into other parts of *Gilgûl*: imprisonment and escape; survival as a burden; the importance, simultaneously, of forgetting and remembering; an inhuman cruelty that releases victims into a sphere of being more spiritual or divine than that of their oppressors; the difficulty of bearing witness and the place of the poet in this scheme of things. In addition to exploring these matters more thoroughly, “*ʿAqēḥôt*” also features many words or phrases which reappear here as if in a refrain from earlier poems.

Opening with a disavowal of the value of escape, the poetic “I” of “*ʿAqēḥôt*” remarks: “Against my will I was continued by this cloud . . .” (*ʿal korḥî/ ḥāyāh lî hemšēk beʿānān hazzeh*). Part I, v. 5 then presents an account of this survival which further expresses ambivalence about its positive worth. “I was a mistake,” we read: “*ḥāyîṯ tqʿût*,” a phrase recalling the same words expressed by the victim of “The Roll Call.” Apparently this man has been forgotten in a cattlecar and is close to death, though not yet irrevocably gone, for we know that at the end of the poem he returns to earth. Curiously, in the spirit realm, he is not the only one who has yet to completely let go of earthly existence. In II, 2 those who have just ascended to the heavens, disoriented, still seek worldly ways to adapt to their new situation. They think that

perhaps bribes or multiple citizenship will be useful to them here. Though those may have been pertinent details in the world of "Instructions for Crossing the Border," in "Footprints" such comments function in a more ironic manner. The reassuring human response of these people to their profound spiritual transformation ensures that a gently comical relief enters even into the poet's apprehension of death. The incongruity between the behavior of those newly arrived and their current circumstances brings even overwhelming experience back down to a scale assimilable by human comprehension, much as was the case in "Draft of a Reparations Agreement."

The poetic "I," like the imaginary man before him, is torn by impulses alternatively to remember and to forget (Note in I,1, the phrase "*menasse liškō'ah*"—"trying to forget," and in II,4, "*menasse lizkôr*"—"trying to remember.") When he does remember, "*belô šûm zekûl lizkôr*"—"without any right to remember" (II,5), he recalls a world that in its brutality inverts the ordinary values of existence, dehumanizing humanity. A heart, blue with cold, stands in contrast to a lantern which is said to be goodnatured, or kind, that is, of good heart ("*lôḥat lēḥ*"). Attributing animation or personification to the inanimate world, making it more alive and approachable than are the people, this poem recalls "Instruction for Crossing the Border," which must admonish the imaginary man that he is indeed a man and should not seek escape with the sparks through the smokestack.

Further echoing "Instructions for Crossing the Border," II,8 of "*Aqebôl*" reports, "the rain stole across some border" (*haggešem gānah ʔēze gehûl*), and as the poetic voice follows the rain, stealing to freedom, it turns to the question of bearing witness. Remarking on the difficulty of expressing what has happened, the man asks "*ʔēpô lehatîl?*" ("Where to begin?"), a phrase reminiscent of the "how to explain" ("*ʔék lehasbîr*") found in "Testimony." He does not know how to describe his escape through the cloud, and notes that the language learned in the heavens is not the same as that of earthly exchange: "*ʔafilu ʔēnennî yôdēʔa ʔlišʔôl . . . ʔanî lômēd šemôt šel štiqā.*" ("I don't even know how to ask/ . . . I am learning the declensions and ascensions of/ silence.") Beginning a descent back to earth, the poem further dwells on the need to impart his experience to others. In II,15 his eyes tell him: "*ʔattāh hû haʔōpel, ʔattāh hû haʔôl*" ("You are the darkness, you are the sign"): We see, consequently that his fate is both a misfortune and also the hope implied in communicating his knowledge to others. Pursuing the matter even more, he notes:

And my throat says to me:

If you are still alive, give me an opening, I
must praise.

כך אומר לי גרוני:

אם עוד אמה חי, פתח לי, אני
חייב להלל.

(In these lines, as in many poems of *Gilgûl* there is a distancing or separation of self from the body, but the body here demands participation in the act of testimony along with the spirit.)

Though the past tense appears prominently through much of “*Aqēhōt*,” the poem’s last verses turn to the present tense. This is the perpetual present, predominant in many poems in *Gilgûl*, that suggests experience not to be forgotten. It imposes its immediacy on the reader—frequently intruding into the reader’s own time scheme—and remaining always a present every time the poem is read. As the self drops from the skies, it sights the earth and makes remarks that are inconclusive and ambiguous but surely meant to stay with us in their immediacy. The poetic voice has not yet arrived at a final destination or resolution to his experience, but he offers us, literally, an overview, which is also a summarizing vision:

And before I arrive

(now to stretch out to the end/
to stretch out)

already awake, spread to the tips of my wings,
against my will guessing that it’s very near,
inside, imprisoned by hopes, there flickers
this ball of the earth,
scarred, covered with footprints.

ולפני שאגיע

(ועכשו להושיט עד הסוף, להושיט)

כבר ער, נפרש עד קצות כנפיי,
על כרחי מנחש שקרוב מאד,
בפנים, שבוי בתקוות, מהבהב לו
כדור הארץ הזה,
מצלק, מכסה עקבות.

This world is at once, like the self, damaged and wounded, yet still not devoid of hope. The contorted syntax of the verse, though, obscuring the reference of the adverb “*bipnîm*” (“inside”) and so obfuscating the relation of earth to self, generates an ambivalence about freedom and captivity hinted at earlier in *Gilgûl*. Perhaps the world is inside the arched blue of the sky (mentioned in the next to last verse) and so is imprisoned by hope; that is, hope is a trap that will not release the spirit or the world into oblivion, but forces it to continue to exist. Perhaps, however, this damaged, frightening world is imprisoned inside the self, captured in the speaker’s own hopes for finding freedom or a new dimension of being that will differ from the ugly entrapments of suffering. (In keeping with this emphasis, section II, verse 11 remarks, “What is above you you already know./ You meant to ask about what is within you.”)

מה שלמעלה ממך אתה ירדע.
 אתה התכונת לשאל
 על מה שפנימה, על מה שתהומה ממך.

In either case, the pain he has known remains an inseparable part of him, even in moments of hope. In either case the survivor's legacy of contradiction prevails, reminding us that survival is not a simple joy, but an unavoidably painful mixture of joy and sorrow.

The second reading, all the same, indicates a more positive outlook, particularly as it evokes the self's desire to return to tell of his experiences. Going away he also comes back, and he brings with him to the everyday world a tale both of torment and of wondrous release. This second reading, further, is meaningful as it points to an overall poetic pattern that informs much of *Gilgûl*. Just as the "I" of "*Aqēḥôl*" defies gravity, moving beyond it and then finding itself again within the earth's pull, Pagis' poems in this collection turn in their treatment of the Holocaust from utterly weighty matters to a lighter playfulness, wonder or hope which also finally anchors the unimaginable in understandably human, down-to-earth terms. Many of the poems in *Gilgûl*, concerned as they are at various levels with transformation, with release from entrapment, may be seen artistically speaking as transformations of this pattern and of one another. As recombinations or reexplorations of elements common to them all, these poems therefore signify, like the footprints with which "*Aqēḥôl*" ends, in two directions. They indicate numerous wanderings, migrations or changes, but as such they are also tracks or traces: reminders, finally, of suffering as well as signs of deliverance from suffering. Both are inescapably imprinted on Pagis' world.

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